

February 28, 2021

**“What’s in a Name”
Sermon by Rev. Susan Drake**

Genesis 17:1–7, 15–16

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.”

Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

Message

“What’s in a Name?”

Did you know there were 18 name changes in the Bible? I’m sure you all are familiar with many of them. Simon to Peter, Saul to Paul, Jacob to Israel. This morning I will just focus on one from this morning's readings; Sarai to Sarah but first more about name changing in general.

In most of the biblical stories God does the name changing when a person is about to be transformed and fitted to God’s purposes, but in many religious practices people rename themselves-- like when a nun takes on a new name when she takes her vows.

Also, when a new Pope is elected they take the name of a Pope in the past that they admire, though this practice actually started in the 6th century when Mercurius was named Pope which is actually the name of a Roman God (Mercury) so it was decided his name should be changed. The optics just weren’t right.

Now in some Native American practices a child could receive one name as a baby, another one in adolescence and more during great events or accomplishments.

Now I have to own up to the fact that I am horrible with names. I thought Jean was Joan and Nancy was Gail and Mark was Mike for the first six months I was here. But I don’t forget who you are.

The one that does everything around here, the one that plays the piano beautifully, the one who is always so welcoming, the one who is so kind and laughs at my jokes, the one who will do anything you need, just ask, the one who lights up when she sees you.

My Great Grandmother Gran Underwood named me. My father had already left my Mother and my brother and sister by the time I was born. Gran decided I would need not one, but two names from the Bible, Rebecca and Susanah, to give me an extra dose of strength and faith. There is power in names and power in naming.

There is also the reverse of this. Think about the 12 million slaves over the 400 years of this country that had names given to them because they were easier to pronounce and robbed them of their own identity.

Think about all the native Americans whose names were changed to biblical names as part of an effort to strip them of their culture. Our denomination has some complicity in that, thinking that the only way to save them was to teach them our ways so they would “fit in”, taking them from their parents and putting them in schools helped them to “fit in”.

But when God renames us the result is very different. Renaming in the Bible showed us that we can evolve as people, we have many different versions of ourselves and we can forgive our past versions, let those cycles and patterns that don't serve us anymore go and begin again as individuals and as a species.

Think about how nice it would be if we could declare ourselves as having evolved beyond our violent ways; our oppressive mentality; and our need to dominate, to control, and to conquer.

On the UCC.org website there are a couple of things I find very helpful. There are daily meditations available and there are resources to help worship leaders. One is called “Worship Ways” which has liturgy available for us to use, you have probably seen me cite it more than once and then there is an area called Sermon seeds, this site is curated and written by Rev. Dr. Cheryl A. Lindsay.

It's meant to help get a preacher started, to help us see something in a different way, or save us some time on pouring through commentaries. Sometimes in the past I have so strongly disagreed with what was written that my sermon has come out of my counter argument to it.

So either way, a very helpful tool provided for us by our denomination. This week Dr. Lindsay was right on the money about Sarah and her name change. Let me read this excerpt:

“Sarah should be her name,” God tells Abraham. It is not a derivative of his or one that allows him to make claims upon her. Rather, it reflects the path God has for her and her progeny. She has an inheritance to leave. She has nations to build. She has royalty to raise. She has a covenant to keep.

Sarai thought that the covenant was only for Abraham so she sought out Hagar. She and her husband used Hagar despicably (to give Abraham his first son):

- Sarah has been named in the promise and given a reason for joy.
- Sarai could not have children and that was the dominant fact of her life.
- Sarah would give rise to nations and leave a legacy.
- Sarai was identified as “my princess,” someone in relationship to another.
- Sarah would be declared “princess” with an identity of her own...and a covenantal relationship with God for herself.”

God gives Sarah and Abraham a new identity and helps them to leave the sins of their past behind. I want to note here that this happened not when Abraham and Sarah were young but when they were up in years.

We worship a God of transformation, of grace, of new beginnings and it doesn't matter how old we are, how useless we think we have become, how barren in our spirits we feel we are. God can give us another chapter as individuals, and as a community of faith.

I wasn't here when St. Peters became Parkside Community United Church of Christ. I imagine that it wasn't easy because there is history in names, there is memory attached to names, and there is identity in a name. But as a church you decided to declare yourself as a church that serves this community and that means something that you would go through that process.

You also named yourself as an Open and Affirming Congregation, again, I'm sure that wasn't easy but you did it. You set yourself on a course naming who God was calling you to be.

As we begin to crawl from our caves of isolation I want you to ask yourself who is God calling you to be, maybe do a little exercise to discern this. Sit down with pen and paper and ask yourself if God was to rename me what would it be?

What do I need from God to be prepared for the next chapter of my life in service to God. And then ask how you can continue to help the church live into it's name change. Let me know what you come up with. AMEN



